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Apple Check

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Every night at Willamette Oaks Retirement Community the residents put a red plastic apple outside their doors to show they're not dead. They remove the apple by ten the next morning to show they're not dead again.

I know this because it's my job to check the apples, to roam the corridors looking for these signs of life. When an apple is missing, I knock on the door. When no one answers, I unlock the door with a master key and find the resident sitting in a recliner, hopefully at least in a bathrobe, staring at the TV through thick glasses that make their eyes look huge and surprised. The volume is turned up all the way, so only after a minute, sensing a disruption in the airflow of the room, do they turn that same expression on me. We blink in unison before I close and relock the door behind me. Occasionally when an apple is missing, I repeat steps one and two (knock, unlock), then perform fruitless CPR on the collapsed body and call for an ambulance. After I contact the family, I e-mail an advertisement for the apartment to the newspaper.

Available: One bedroom in retirement community. Washer dyer, electric included. Meals, housekeeping optional.

Morning or evening, the routine is the same. My husband tells me I should find a different job.

"One where you don't have to work so much," he says.

He wants children. He won't say it, but he believes my job, not the diaphragm I use, is the reason we don't have kids; that somehow the air in the building has aged my womb, dried it down to a coarse and mealy peach. Or maybe that the death itself, touching my lips to theirs, has scared away any new life that might be lingering about me.

He doesn't put things in those terms, though. He speaks aphoristically, not figuratively. "We're supposed to make things, young people like us. That's what we're here for." He's not disingenuous. He's in construction. He's happy enough to come home at night sweaty and exhausted. I make him dinner and leave it in the warmed oven before I go back to check the apples.

Once a week it's my turn to stay overnight at Willamette Oaks in case a resident pulls the emergency cord. If this happens, I'm to call the ambulance immediately, remove the first aide kit from its storage space under the counter, then go check on the resident in the apartment. I should use my master key. If they have fallen, I should not attempt to move them. If they have impaled themselves on an object, I should not attempt to remove it. If they are vomiting, running a fever, or a have similar malady, I should apply a cold compress to their forehead, but attempt nothing else. If they are depressed or ranting, I should limit what I say to things like "There, there." Mainly, I should wait, and if necessary, e-mail an advertisement to the paper in the morning.

I have standard advertisements for one and two bedroom apartments, for ones with washer and dryer and ones without, for ones that are 990 sq. ft and ones that are 1100 sq. ft.

Other routines are like this: at ten o'clock I check the apples, and the kitchen staff puts out fresh cookies and iced tea in the dining area. From noon to one thirty we serve lunch. After that, the staff goes into the kitchen to grab lunch. Rod, the building manager, measures teaspoons of mayonnaise and salad dressing, recording the numbers in the notebook he's carried ever since he's returned from his triple by-pass. Michael, our chef, will sneak hot sauce onto my sandwich if I'm not diligent. Also, if I'm not diligent, Jon, one of the maintenance men, will whisper dirty jokes into my ear, holding my arm as he does so. Rod smiles at me and carries his tray out with one hand, using the other to hitch up his pants.

Michael used to be in a rock band. Every Sunday, while prepping meals for the week, he listens to football games on the radio, and sometimes, when he sings along to the car commercials that have co-opted jingles from his favorite bands of the eighties, it's almost beautiful. When I think it might be happening I walk back into the kitchen and ask him what the soup of the day will be, claiming a resident wants to know.

He tells me, "I don't know, I found some moldy stuff in the fridge I'm calling split pea." Then he hands me a cookie. I think he thinks that's why I go back there. At four thirty we begin serving dinner

My husband tells me we should invite Toni and her husband over for dinner next week. Toni works at the front desk with me. She has access to all the same files and manages all the same complaints. She checks the apples on

the other wing. My husband likes her. Not only has she had a child with each of her three husbands but she even takes in foster kids.

"She does it for extra cash," I tell him.

"But she still gives those kids a good home."

"By objective standards or only by comparison?"

"What? Whose standards?"

"Exactly."

"Just call them." He slaps the paper down in such a way that tells me that although his arm is weary from work, he still has enough energy to slap this paper down. I've never aggravated him beyond this point.

I pick up the phone and wind my finger through the twists of the cord until it covers the entire length. Toni and husband number three (Todd) agree to come over next week.

Though Toni and I look nothing alike, the residents often call us by each other's names. She's blond and wears mature versions of whatever the teenagers are wearing. She bundles her flesh into Capri pants, or low rise jeans on casual days, as if the tight fit will stop the sag. She layers her hair, and puts in blonder streaks. Seventeen must have been her favorite age. Though, I suppose that's not unusual.

When the residents call me Toni, I answer anyway. I'm smaller and darker, as if I were made out of her leftovers. I'm sure when they call her by my name she says, "No. I'm Toni."

The old ladies like to talk to Toni and me about husbands. Few of the female residents here have husbands that are not dead, and it's the widows who like to talk the most. (Incidentally, a single man in his seventies or eighties is initially the most popular resident upon moving in. I tell Toni we should put an ad in the paper that reads: Widowers Have It Good at Willamette Oaks. 60s, 70s, even into your 80s.) But it's been awhile since a new man's moved in, so today we talk about dead husbands.

"He got so angry when the new garage door opener he installed wouldn't work, he got in car and drove right through the door."

"He got so angry when the Christmas lights wouldn't light up, he just yanked them down. Pulled the gutter nearly off. Left it that way too, for nearly a year."

"He got so angry when I wouldn't make him steak after his first heart attack, that one time he threw his dinner plate against the wall. The potatoes stuck right up there too. I guess I did make them too thick."

He got so angry when I wouldn't have a child....

They laugh at it all. They ask me how long I've been married, and when I say ten years, they think that's why I'm not laughing with them. "Give it time," they say. I have no way to tell if that's not all I need to do. They ask me how many children I have and I say, "None, but Toni has three," and slip into the back room while they ask her their names and ages, again.

When Toni and Todd arrive, Hank asks them where the kids are.

"Marissa's watching them." Marissa's the teenage girl they've recently taken in.

At dinner my husband continues to ask about their children. He smiles to hear their names and ages. They all seem to make perfect sense, to be the missing answers for the crosswords he never finishes. He needs more information. How are they doing in school? Do they play any sports? He bets Mark's a real slugger.

Todd answers, "I know Joe's gonna be. He's already this big."

I find that doubtful, but say nothing. Besides, I guess being "this big" seems reasonable for a child his age. While the men look at the pictures Todd's pulled out of Toni's purse, I take Toni into the kitchen under the guise of clearing the table.

I dump the dishes in the sink. "I think he's messing with my diaphragm," I say, speaking lower than the water from the faucet.

"What?" she says.

"My diaphragm. I think Hank's messing with it."

"Why would he do that?"

"He wants a baby." I hate that it sounds so obvious, but it seems the best approach with Toni.

"How would he even do that?"

"I think he's poking holes in it."

"How do you know?"

I pull her by the arm to the bathroom, leaving the kitchen faucet running. I take my diaphragm from the medicine cabinet and hold it under the sink. "Here, watch." I put water into.

"What am I watching?"

"Just wait."

"I don't see anything."

"That's why you have to wait." She's leaning against the doorframe, her arms crossed. "Here," I say "feel it." I grab her hand and try to make her feel the bottom of the diaphragm, where I'm sure a drop of water has come through.

"Ew, no." She pulls away. I reach for her hand again and she gives mine a small sharp slap on its top. I wonder if Mark, Tina, Joe, and other anonymous children get the same rebuke when they want something.

"You're starting to lose it," she says. "Besides, don't you want a kid?"

A logic so simple and direct my only response can be, "Not under surreptitious circumstances."

An argument so pedantic the only appropriate counter-argument could be, "What?"

We go back to the kitchen. I wash and Toni dries.

Wanted: Child this big, self-sufficient, for woman w/husband/old people.

One day Michael comes to the front desk to tell me the soup of the day is Vegetable Beef. He puts on elbow on the counter and leans in close to me. I sit up a little, present my ear. "Vera's sun bathing," he whispers. We giggle.

Vera is one of our oldest residents. When the weather is warm and sunny she sits on her balcony topless, and yells at Michael for feeding bread to the geese and causing all that squawking. The housekeepers say she reuses toilet paper and saves her bath water to wash clothes in. A conservative free spirit. Can you really be such a thing? Either way, I'm grateful her apple is set out and taken in with daily promptness.

When I'm done telling this to my husband, I say, "I guess some people don't have to worry about the baby because they never throw out the bath water."

He takes it as a jab at him, which I knew he would. "Well I worry," he says.

"About the bath water?"

"You know that's not it."

"Then what is it?"

"The baby."

"The baby's not in any danger."

"We don't have a baby to put in danger."

"You want a baby so we can put it in danger?"

"You know that's not what I mean."

"Then don't be mean."

"Why do you always do this?"

"What else am I supposed to do?"

"Have a fucking baby, all right. That's what people do, they have fucking babies."

"Do you want me to tell you what that sounds like?" I ask first, because I know how mad he can get, and this might not be the best time to accuse him of being a child molester. As an answer he slams the paper down on the kitchen table, the most convincing argument he can make. I carry over his plate of food.

Available: Female, 27, ½ income, meals, housekeeping included. Will consider having baby.

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I'm filling in for Toni because Marissa is in the hospital. The teenagers she takes in often end up in the hospital, so I'm not surprised. They're worth more money that way. The phone rings at the front desk. It's Martha and she's scared.

"I hear gun shots," she says.

"Gun shots?"

"Gun shots," she whispers.

"I haven't heard anything here—"

"Right there! Did you hear it?"

"No."

"I think they're close by," she's whispering again, and I hear the faint hollow in her voice that lets me know she's cupping the receiver with her hand. She has terrible arthritis, so I imagine it must be painful.

I'm not too worried about the shots because I know no resident in Willamette Oaks owns a gun. If some one did, I'd have it on file in my computer. I could look it up right now and show Martha, but I also know she wouldn't find any comfort in that.

"I'll be right down," I say.

I hurry to Martha's room. Could there be a shooter on the property? But nobody else seems to have noticed. Ralph is heading towards the pool room. He nods his cap and I wave but don't stop. I like Ralph. I like that he always wears a cap, and that he always tries to sneak his dinner into the lobby to chat with me while he eats. Though the residents thrive on our routine, it's not as if we don't take comfort in theirs.

Martha's waiting in her doorway, afraid to entirely leave or enter her apartment.

"Martha," I say, and guide her inside. Her eyes are wide and shimmering.

"It's coming from the back."

"I'm sure it's nothing—" I'm interrupted by an exploding sound. I jump while I'm holding Martha's hands and I know I've made things worse. "I'll go and see what it is," I say.

I walk towards the back and push the door open to check in the bathroom. Then the bedroom. I turn the corner to the kitchen and another loud boom almost drops me to my knees. Then I notice there's gunk all over the walls, and that it stinks. I straighten and go to the stove.

"Martha!" I call, "Were you boiling eggs?" The water has evaporated and two eggs sit rattling in the hot dry pan. One's like a chick ready to break through and I drop to the ground just as it explodes over the walls and ceiling.

"Oh," Martha says in her little voice, "I guess I was."

I reach up and move the pot to a cool burner. I turn the knob off and I wipe my brow in an exaggerated motion. Martha stands in the entryway like a chastised child and tries to laugh. I pick a bit of shell out of my hair. Then I go over to her and put my hands on her shoulders.

"Don't worry about it." I nod so she'll nod. "I'll call housekeeping." She's nodding along.

"Michael." Marci says, "Cora says this beef's too tough. She wants the lasagna instead."

He looks at me, then the plate. Marci imitates his glance, trying to see the significance in what he was looking at. She's barely seventeen, and hopeful in that way all seventeen-year-old girls are—with that quality that you refer to as faith or foolishness (or some other f-word) after you've outgrow whatever it was.

"Tell her we're all out," he says.

She looks at the tray full of lasagna and her eyes and lips quiver in confusion. A sauce stain on her white shirt seems to grow with her stillness. I want to take a damp cloth and scrub at it, and say "There, there," since I heard a resident yelled at her yesterday. But I'm only ten years older than her, and it

seems like a stupid gesture anyway. The waiters and waitresses are just a rotating crop of high school kids. We have a standard ad for them in the paper. Wanted: Server.

"Michael," I say in a mock scolding tone. Servers don't get jokes. "I'll bring the dish out," I tell Marci, and guide her back out the door to the dining room. The waiters and waitresses are just a rotating crop of high school kids. We have a standard ad for them in the paper. Wanted: Server.

When I bring her the plate, Cora asks why I took her food. I explain to her that she didn't like the beef, and she gives me that stare as if I've just barged into her apartment. I tell her she said she wanted the lasagna instead. Her lips part their stickiness as her mouth falls open. I tell her I thought she would like the lasagna better, and she reaches for the plate.

Her husband, Willie, says, "Damnit, you said you wanted it. Now eat it."

We'll laugh about that when he's dead.

Michael often goes down to the music room on his break to play one of the donated guitars. He's the only one to use them. No one who worked here and saw the residents struggling to hold a knife and fork or to turn a doorknob would think they needed guitars. I find him there today. I pick up another guitar and sit next to him.

"Hold it the other way," he says.

I flip it over and ask, "You ever think of having kids?"

"No."

I wonder if he tells that to the residents here, and if they go, "Oh, sure you do," or "You just wait," like they say to me, like all passages of time must necessarily follow the way they passed their time.

I only say, "How long have you been married?"

"Five years."

"Ten," like I've won.

"This is C." He organizes his fingers along the upper frets, them strums the cords. I look at his hand and try to imitate it. We ignore the discord of my note.

"Does your wife want kids?" I've forgotten her name.

"No." He changes his left hand again. "This is G."

I try, but "I can't get my pinkie to stay."

He slides his hand down the neck, "This is G, too." He strums the cords and they sound the same.

"How many different Gs are there?"

"Oh, I don't know, a ton."

"I only want one."

The fans on the high ceiling slowly rotate as if a breeze is turning them. Sometimes this is the only quiet place. I struggle with the second G until Michael's goes back to work.

Wanted: One way. The only way.

When I return to the front desk, Willie is pushing his walker down the hall like it's something in his way. When a resident comes down in the middle of the day, it's usually for one of three reasons. One, they have family coming to visit and want to tell anyone. Two, they want to complain about something. Or three, they've broken something.

"Cora broke the towel rack," he says.

"I'll call maintenance," I say, but he's not listening. He's already begun his slow circle and retreat up the hall. After lunch I send Jon down there with a replacement rod. He comes running back seconds later.

"Cora's in the tub," he says.

"What?"

"She fell in the shower. She's been stuck in the tub."

I was so angry.... I run down to their apartment and find Jon's right. Cora lies like a curl calf in the bathtub. I squat down and wrap my arms around her chest. The cold and wet of her skin sink through my clothes and touch my own chest. She can't be more than ninety pounds. She tries to stand, but her feet

keep slipping on the tub, like I'm holding up a puppet to make it dance. I pull her over the edge and help her into her bathrobe, which I tie loosely so as not to aggravate the purple spills of bruises on her side. She says she doesn't want to go the hospital, (it was the first thing she said to me when I walked in), so I put her in bed and shut the door to muffle the sound of the television show Willie's still watching.

Later that night, I'm the one staying over, idly letting the switchboard blur in and out of focus while picturing Hank's expression when he opens the empty over, since I didn't go home to make his dinner. I imagine him angry. Then I imagine him confused, checking in the refrigerator then oven again. Then angry, his pulse rising as he stands in the center of the kitchen.

A red light is flashing on the grid in front of me. Someone in Cora and Willie's apartment has pulled the emergency cord. I try to forget about Hank as I make my way down the hall. I don't think he'd be so keen to want a child if it was his uterus and his nine months, but I've used that argument so often that now he's beginning to say, "If I could have this baby myself, I would."

What can I say to that, to impossible offers? I could say "What the fuck?" which is what Willie says when I burst through the door. I do it with flare because that's how I believe people want to be rescued. He's watching TV in his T-shirt and underwear. I don't know what to do until I hear Cora vomiting in the bathroom. I run there. Towels and bathrobes are scattered on the floor. She's hunched over the toilet, one hand still gripping the cord. Willie's behind me now, with his walker but still without his pants.

"How long has she been like this?"

"Don't know. She'll be fine."

I kneel beside her and wipe at the corner of her mouth with a bath towel. I can feel her vertebrae rattle under her thin shirt and wonder how she's staying together.

"Call the ambulance," I tell him.

"Nope."

"What?"

"Nope."

"What?"

"Nope."

"I know that. Why nope?" I flush the toilet to give us all a momentary relief from the smell. Cora vomits again. Small chunks of bile. Smaller clots of blood.

"Not gonna pay for the ambulance."

His answer is so concise I know he's rehearsed it, sliced out extra syllables and letters like he has to pay by the word.

I go to the kitchen phone and take the receiver off the wall. Before I get to the 9, he's tries to wrest the phone from my hand. I'm so surprised I drop it. He brandishes it in front of my face. I tug at the cord and he loses his grip. I snap it up and begin to dial again. He comes at me again, but this time I'm more forceful. I wrap the cord around my wrist so he can't pull it away.

There's no procedure for this in our handbook, so I make up my own. Comfort wife. Gain control of phone by pushing elderly man. Call 911.

"We don't need an ambulance!" he shouts towards the receiver, working his walker closer.

"Yes, we do."

"No!"

"She's dying!"

"No she's not. She's done this before." A logic so simple and direct my only response can be, "What the hell is wrong with you?"

He slaps at my hand, but I already hear the operator telling me an ambulance is on the way.

When Cora dies, Willie will be the most popular man in the place. For now the doctors say she'll be fine, but I'd be surprised if she had the gall to do it again. As much as we all love routine.

Hank's and my routine goes like this. Up at six. Breakfast. He leaves for work, often with a lunch we both help pack. I leave for work. I come home and make

dinner. I make him a plate to warm up later if he's not home yet. Occasionally, on the nights I'm not at Willamette Oaks, we have sex with our shirts still on. I sneak my diaphragm in earlier so we don't have an argument about it. Sometimes I have it in before he even returns home. It's not that bad. It's been nearly this for nearly ten years. I have no better explanation than I was seventeen when we started and never found a good enough reason to stop.

"I can't believe his phone actually rang." Michael says.

"How come you don't want a child?" I ask.

"I like my freedom."

"Then how come you're married?"

"I like my wife."

"What else do you like?"

He thinks a moment. "Fishing." He hands me a cookie.

"I like these," I say.

I go to check the apples and eat my cookie, feeling a strange pleasure in ticking off the missing fruit. Even Willie and Cora have removed theirs. I come to Ralph's room. The plastic apple is winking at me by way of the hall light. Oh Ralph, I think, and follow procedure. Knock. Wait for an answer. Use skeleton key to open door. Search kitchen, dining area, living room, bedroom, bathroom. I find him in the tub. When I first enter the room and see only his legs, I'm prepared to perform CPR, to roll up my sleeves and go, but since he shot out his mouth with a .22, I stand there gaping, only one sleeve ready. Ralph, who couldn't swallow the soup, let alone the tenderized beef, swallowed a bullet.

I don't appreciate the irony. Instead I appreciate the neat grey suit he has on and the white bath towels he's arranged around his neck to keep blood from spilling on it. Loose tie ends peak out from under the stained towels. His hands were always shaky. I imagine him trying to tie it in the mirror, the simple loop, tuck, and pull evading his grip like toads hop away from children. I know it's a scene now. I know I'm supposed to do nothing but pull the emergency cord. I lean over and, carefully, away from the blood, tie the tie the best I can.

His cap has fallen to back edge of the tub. His white hair wisps up from his head. I pull the knot snug under his chin.

"Holy shit," Toni says, and I sit up from the tub's edge, my hand still hanging from the pull cord. She's holding the first aid kit. "Look at that."

"Is the ambulance on the way?"

"Not much good they'll do."

We look at him. "Holy shit," she says again.

I sit back down and wait for the police.

"Stop pulling the cord," Toni slaps at my hand and I let it drop.

By the time the other residents are awake, the ambulance is gone and the blood, mixed with Clorox, has circled down the drain. The cleaning staff said it was easier than getting the shit off some of these toilets. All day I'm impressed by Ralph Edison's consideration for others.

Though it's not the first suicide at Willamette Oaks, Hank comes home early from work. He showers and burns me dinner.

"Are you alright?"

"Fine."

"Are you sure?"

"I've seen it before."

"Was it bad?"

"No. He was just dead."

"How's that not bad?"

"He was so sick. He just didn't want to do it any more."

"So you're not traumatized?" His places his heavy hands on my shoulders.

That night, while having sex with my husband, I imagine I'm giving birth to an old man. The bald head, the wrinkled face, the shaking balled fist; every aspect showing indignance at being dragged into this world. Hank and I dress him in a gray suit, tie his tie, take pictures, and send him off to school with a bagged lunch and ball cap. Hank teaches him to swing the baseball bat he'd bought while my belly was still big. The old man, our son, swings with all his might, is carried around by the weight and momentum of the bat, falls and shatters a hip.

It seems that soon after, everyone leaves Willamette Oaks. Michael and his wife move to San Francisco. Rod dies of congestive heart failure as someone performs fruitless CPR. Toni leaves to raise foster children full time. And I sit at this front desk, placing ads and showing rooms to prospective residents and their children, or grandchildren, or whoever's really making the decisions now.

I show them the dining room first, the tables spread out and covered with dark green cloths. I walk them out to the lake, scattering the geese in front of me. If Vera's out, I wave. I show them the pool tables, the little library, the music room, the common area. Last, I show them the apartment. The kitchen, the living room, the bathroom. The carpets have been steam cleaned. It smells of fresh paint. They ask questions about meals, activities, amenities. They're so common, I answer most with stock responses, the words falling out of me, but I pause when they ask what's happened to the previous resident. The old folks look at me with magnified eyes while their son-in-laws inspect the grout work. Then I say the resident has moved on to a facility that offers more aid.

At home things follow routine too, until the day when Hank gives me the ultimatum—baby or he's gone—and I stare wide-eyed at him. Once he gets going, he tells me my other flaws as well, the coldness, the sarcasm. He asks what happened to the girl I was? A plea so unremarkable my only possible response is the silence that I've kept until this moment's arrival.

About Dani Rado

Dani Rado recently graduated from the university of Denver's creative writing program and currently is an assistant professor at Johnson & Wales University. She's had works published in *Harpur Palate*, *Mochila Review*, *SNReview*, *5th Wednesday*, and *Clackamas Literary Review*, among others.